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**“NOBODY WITH A GOOD CAR NEEDS TO BE JUSTIFIED”: MATERIALISM  
AND COMMERCIALISM IN FLANNERY O’CONNOR’S FICTION**

By

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B.A., Saint Xavier University, 1990

THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts,

With a Major in English

Governors State University

University Park, IL 60466

2014

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## ABBREVIATIONS

3BFO .....	3 By Flannery O'Connor
TCS .....	Flannery O'Connor: The Complete Stories
MM .....	Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose
HB .....	The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor

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## Thesis Abstract

### “Nobody With a Good Car Needs to be Justified”: Materialism and Commercialism in Flannery O’Connor’s Fiction

Flannery O’Connor was writing in a time of great transition for American society. The 1950s brought with them a post-war economy that was creating a middle class that suddenly had disposal income and leisure time. To O’Connor, this translated into a culture that was becoming increasingly more distracted by the secular and material, and moving farther and farther away from the Christian ideal. This was not simply a cultural phenomenon to her – it was a danger, and more to the point, as a Christian writer, it was a call to arms. O’Connor’s work can be seen as a series of warnings, complete with usually dire consequences. The main theme that runs through the majority of her work is deceptively simple: if you choose to put your faith in anything or anyone other than the Christian God, there will be grave repercussions. O’Connor illustrated this by creating characters that did exactly that.

What I plan to examine is how O’Connor’s characters fall prey to the particular version of materialism she assigns them, what that materialism represents in the context of the character and story O’Connor chooses to place them in, and ultimately, how they magnify her main theme of spiritual vacuity. Mrs. Cope’s obsession with her property and land in *A Circle in the Fire*, for

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example, is shown for the shallow preoccupation that it is as she watches her property burn away.

A substantial part of my thesis will focus on the role post-war materialism and commercialism play in Flannery O'Connor's work, with a close emphasis on how those ideas manifest in her novel *Wise Blood*. In a novel where the controlling motif of spiritual blindness is so pronounced, O'Connor chooses to keep the “sub-theme” of modern materialism much more subtly (but stubbornly) in the background, but in a way that bolsters, by contrast, the idea of spiritual vacuity.

My goal in this thesis is to show how O'Connor utilizes the encroachment of materialism and commercialism as, not only reinforcement to her predominant theme of modern culture's spiritual void, but as an organic theme that also complements and extends naturally from her central Christian ideology. More importantly, I will examine how these substitutes act as a kind of gauge – one that emphasizes by contrast how far from the ideal her characters (and by implication, modern culture) have strayed from the path of Salvation.

## INTRODUCTION

Flannery O'Connor's brief literary career paralleled a dynamic era in America's cultural history. By the time she began writing her first novel, *Wise Blood*, around 1950, the world around her was changing rapidly. World War II expenditures had pulled the country out of the Depression and into an era of unprecedented prosperity resting on a broad, solid middle class. Suddenly, people had disposable income in an age of technological advancement that created exciting new things for them to buy. In the meantime, a whole new industry exploded to influence how that income was spent – Advertising. Advertising expenditures more than doubled between 1940 and 1955 (Carrier), as this booming industry jumped on finding ways to sell products to the new financially healthy middle class. Advertising also found a new medium in television as a way to insinuate its products directly into America's living rooms. The combination of easy access to consumers and the utilization of propaganda research funded by the government to fight World War II (Young 30-32) made for a powerful tool. Through images and slogans, the advertising industry's underlying message to America's middle class was unmistakable – material acquisition = fulfillment, consumption = happiness. This materialism, in effect, fed on itself as the “keeping up with the Joneses” mentality urged consumers to keep buying newer versions of products so as to be seen as successful and happy.

None of this was lost on O'Connor, of course, who was keenly aware of the

shift in the social consciousness that resulted from America's growing obsession with material goods. In an essay entitled "The Fiction Writer & His Country," O'Connor took aim at the advertising industry and how it was infesting, not only culture, but religious life. Ad agencies, she wrote, were "entirely capable of showing us our unparalleled prosperity and our almost classless society" (MM 34) – a reference, of course, to a declining morality rather than an erasure of socio-economic stratification. O'Connor saw this onslaught of commercialism as, most importantly, a distraction from the spiritual.

O'Connor's aversion to the new consumerism was undoubtedly intensified by her dread of its seeping into religious life, and more specifically, the Catholic Church. The religious "revival" of the 1950s, epitomized by the popularity of Billy Graham as the first "televangelist," was spurred on by the power of television, as well as the incorporation of advertising industry tactics (Petigny 411). This influence of mass media certainly led to higher church membership, but it also commercialized and diluted religious faith, gradually eroding some of the institutional tenets separating the different denominations. In O'Connor's view, this translated into a "watering down" of the Catholic faith she subscribed to so dogmatically. More broadly, her fear was that religion was becoming just another aspect of the artificial middle class lifestyle - one that saw spirituality as another leisure activity and the following of church doctrine as discretionary. Her now famous retort of "if it's a symbol, then the hell with it," to a fellow scholar who suggested that the Eucharist was a "pretty good symbol" (HB 125) is indicative of O'Connor's absolutism when it came to her Catholicism. For the



dogmatic O'Connor, a mitigated or conditional faith was worse than no faith at all. Thus, the hypocritical "Christian" who wears his or her religious conviction for show recurs often in O'Connor's work. Characters like Mrs. Cope, Mrs. May, and Mrs. McIntyre, from "A Circle in the Fire," "Greenleaf," and "The Displaced Person," respectively, reference their "faith" only when it is convenient, as opposed to acting according to its tenets.

We should also not be surprised that the automobile shows up so frequently in O'Connor's fiction as a symbol of America's postwar materialism. Automobile sales grew steadily after World War II, and in 1949 alone, 5 million cars were sold (Sivulka 209). This obsession with the auto created a need for a new highway system, which in turn gave rise to billboard advertising. Thus, America's newly realized obsession with cars was indirectly changing not only the economies of cities and towns but their physical landscapes as well. More to the point, car owners saw their automobiles as not only a means of transportation, but as an indicator of wealth and social class. O'Connor saw America's new infatuation with automobiles as indicative of a need for value and fulfillment that should rightfully be filled by Christian grace.

Also occurring during O'Connor's lifetime was the cultural phenomenon known as the "baby boom," which took place between 1946 and 1964. With economic security came the instinct to "nest," and in the United States, the birthrate soared by a whopping 25 percent at the end of the war and remained steady throughout the 1950s (Sivulka 203). More babies meant a demand for more housing (and more stores), and this in turn translated, with the help of the

explosion of auto sales and the subsequent implementation of the highway system, into an encroachment on the agrarian lifestyle, especially in O'Connor's South. For O'Connor, this incursion of the urban and commercial was just another method by which materialism was insinuating itself in the modern culture, and crowding out the quickly dimming spiritual consciousness. O'Connor's aversion to the onslaught of commercialism is embodied in stories like "A View of the Woods" (examined later in this thesis), and in her first novel, *Wise Blood*.

My goal in this thesis is to show these allusions to commercialism and materialism as, not only reinforcement to O'Connor's predominant theme of modern culture's spiritual void, but as an organic theme that also complements and extends naturally from her central Christian ideology. The distinctive versions of materialism addressed in each of the works examined here all share one thing in common – they are all pernicious to O'Connor, not only in and of themselves, but especially in that they are antithetical to Christian precepts.

I begin this analysis with O'Connor's first novel, *Wise Blood*, because it is in this work, more than any other, that O'Connor takes particular aim at the commercialism that she saw as so destructive to modern culture's spiritual life. The 1950's car culture marked in *Wise Blood* also becomes an O'Connor target in the following chapter as an old Ford becomes central to the main character's materialistic motivations in the short story "The Life You Save May Be Your Own." The short stories examined in the subsequent three chapters ("A Circle in the Fire," "Greenleaf," and "The Displaced Person") all have as their protagonists widowed female land owners. Here, O'Connor turns her attention to the worship

of property and possessions and the dire spiritual consequences that inevitably follow. The final work examined, “A View of the Woods,” deals with land and property as well, but in terms of Christian stewardship, with the intrusion of commercialism again in O’Connor’s sights.

## 1. THE CHURCH OF COMMODITY: ADVERTISING AND COMMERCIALISM IN *WISE BLOOD*

What role exactly do post-war materialism and commercialism play in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* and, more specifically, how do they reinforce O'Connor's main theme of spiritual vacuity? In a novel where this controlling motif is so pronounced, O'Connor chooses to keep the “sub-theme” of modern materialism much more subtly (but steadily) in the background. These references to materialism seem to remain in the reader's peripheral vision throughout the novel, and their importance is usually so overshadowed by the much more intense and blatant Christian imagery that it would be easy to dismiss them as simply part of the scenery as her characters often do.

Materialism as a motif sneaks in to the novel almost from the outset. *Wise Blood's* opening scene takes place in a train carrying our main character, Hazel Motes, to Taulkinham. He has the ill luck of being seated across from Mrs. Wally

Bee Hitchcock, who insists on questioning him despite his obviously unfriendly demeanor. Her obsession with his origins and her physical contortions trying to make out the number on the price tag he forgot to tear off his new suit are a commentary on the new socioeconomic classes created by the new economy. Finally squinting and able to make out that the price tag reads \$11.98... “she felt that that placed him and looked at his face again as if she were fortified against it now” (3BFO 3). Mrs. Hitchcock can only feel comfortable when she can finally “place” him in the right economic class.

Later, O'Connor adds a scene in which Hazel is seated in the dining car with “three women dressed like parrots” (3BFO 6), again making a statement on what George A. Kilcourse Jr. calls the “post-Christian world” (51). Hazel makes confrontational statements (“If you've been redeemed” he said, “I wouldn't want to be”) only to be laughed at (3BFO 7). The implication here is that only in a society that values Belief would Hazel's statements be provocative. Instead, he is merely an annoyance. The chapter (and the train trip) ends with the porter's arresting words: when Hazel exclaims, “Jesus”, the porter answers “Jesus been a long time gone” (3BFO 3). Kilcourse sees this proclamation correctly as more than a historical observation, “it is an observation about a culture where religion has become confused with sentimentality and success” (46). In other words, Christianity is losing sight of what it is based on, and becoming just another aspect of the middle-class lifestyle.

The city of Taulkinham where Hazel finally disembarks acts as a microcosm of that kind of increasingly commercialized, spiritually impoverished culture

O'Connor saw American society moving closer and closer to – a city increasingly being taken over by consumerism. Immediately upon stepping off the train, Hazel is bombarded with advertising:

When he got to Taulkinham, as soon as he stepped off the train, he began to see signs and lights. PEANUTS, WESTERN UNION, AJAX, TAXI, HOTEL, CANDY. Most of them were electric and moved up and down or blinked frantically. He walked very slowly, carrying his duffel bag by the neck. His head turned to one side, then the other, first toward one sign and then another (3BFO 14).

It is no coincidence that Hazel's turning his head back and forth to take in the inundation of advertising mimics the Jesus figure that keeps swinging back and forth in the back of his head. But while he is trying to shake off the image that he should be allowing to guide him, it is the attention grabbing signs that he allows to lead him. It is through signed advertisements of one kind or another that he is led through the events of the novel. An advertisement for a car lot leads him to the car he buys, a sign announcing a room for rent leads him to his final home, a bathroom “advertisement” leads him to Leora Watts.

As Hazel is walking through town, O'Connor takes a rare moment from the plot-focused story to quietly illustrate how advertisements and merchandising distract us all:

The black sky was underpinned with long silver streaks that looked like scaffolding and depth on depth behind it were thousands of stars that all seemed to be moving very slowly as if they were

about some vast construction work that involved the whole order of the universe and would take all time to complete. No one was paying any attention to the sky. The stores in Taulkinham stayed open on Thursday nights so people could have an extra opportunity to see what was for sale (3BFO 18).

Too busy looking at things to buy, the residents of Taulkinham are ignoring the expanse and brilliance of God's universe. To O'Connor, culture is increasingly distracted by the material at the expense of the spiritual.

As Hazel walks through town he stops where a crowd is gathered to see a potato peeler demonstration. It is a conspicuous choice that O'Connor makes to refer to the table the peeler salesman sets up as an "altar." O'Connor describes the peeler salesman's pitch as if it were some kind of mock miracle, meant to remind the reader of Jesus turning water into wine: "as he turned the handle, the potato went into the box and then in a second, backed out the other side, white" (3BFO 18). This is the new America, O'Connor is suggesting, bowing at the altar of consumerism. As Jon Lance Bacon observes, O'Connor sees an America where "American religion has been appropriated by the 'salesman's world.' In the world of the novel, faith itself becomes a commodity" (Bacon, Fondness 39). But one could argue that what O'Connor is suggesting is that American religion has not only been *appropriated* by the "salesman's world," it *becomes* the salesman's world. Soon after the peeler salesman begins his pitch, Asa Hawkes and his daughter vie for the attention of the gathering crowd and compete with him for the consumers' money like any other business would.

It is at the sales demonstration where we (and Hazel) meet Enoch Emery, who, it could be argued, represents the culmination of consumer culture in the novel. Enoch spends all his free time acting like a consumer in one way or another. He visits soda fountains, supermarkets, movies, and is the first in line to watch the sales demonstration on the street. Working in the museum that is in the heart of the park, which is in the middle of the city, Enoch is completely immersed in the crossroads of an increasingly commercialized nerve center. More than simply susceptible to commercialism, Enoch is so easily taken in by urban advertising and marketing, he allows it to remold him into another being entirely. The movie posters able to coax him even in to movies he tells himself he does not want to see, become realized suddenly when he sees an advertisement announcing that “Gonga, Giant Jungle Monarch” will be visiting Taulkinham. Enoch waits in line to meet Gonga, who is actually an ill-tempered actor dressed in a gorilla suit, and winds up being told to “go to hell” by the “star.” Later, Enoch sneaks into the van transporting the promotional crew and steals Gonga’s costume. In the last scene in which we encounter Enoch, he is wandering the city’s park in his new guise, terrifying strangers by trying to shake their hands.

Many critics conclude, not incorrectly, that Enoch’s appropriation of the gorilla costume and his simian “transformation” is O’Connor’s way of reducing him back to the most primitive animal state, the most inevitable end for a character worshipping museum oddities and adhering to secular rituals. Jon Lance Bacon, however, sees Enoch’s transformation as inevitable for another reason. Bacon argues that Enoch has been completely taken over by the

Hollywood marketing that has so enthralled him, becoming a symbol of the “complete subjugation of the individual to modern marketing and advertising” (Bacon, Cold War 32). In his overwhelming need for human contact, he mistakes movie star glorification for true connection. Bacon also perceptively notices the change in pronoun in the narrative and explains how it reflects Enoch’s metamorphosis:

Donning the ape suit, Enoch anticipates a new and improved self. The narrative, however, shows only the loss of individual identity. Enoch will be obscured, not improved, by the commercial image. He disappears, leg by leg, arm by arm, into the ape suit: “A blacker heavier shaggier figure replaces his.” The narrative no longer refers to Enoch by name. He becomes a two-headed, then a one-headed “it” ... and his transformation into a gorilla has less to do with animal nature than the consumer culture. In *Wise Blood*, forms of advertising and marketing envelop the self, submerging it in a world of salable objects (123).

So entrenched is he in the consumer culture, he easily mistakes a pay-to-see museum oddity for a new Christ. Steve Pinkerton is correct in assessing the mummy as a stand-in for real spiritual symbols as well as an indictment of consumer culture (458), but I have to disagree with his trying to make it somehow a sign of the modern “mystery” that is at the center of Christian theology. The mummy is presented, as O'Connor has presented objects and people in her short stories repeatedly, as a kind of “false idol” that acts as a distraction to characters



that are trying to fill a spiritual void with something secular. In this case it doubles as commodity. Kept behind a case, tickets are sold to view it. And as is fitting in a culture based on acquiring more and more goods, Enoch assumes this “new Jesus” is something that can be taken and “owned” – that it is a possession he can have for his. And of course, a false god based on consumerism would expect Enoch to spend all his money changing his apartment into a shrine to it.

Despite Enoch's desperate attempts to get Hazel to see the mummy he thinks will bond them somehow as secret “believers,” Enoch is nothing more than an annoyance to Hazel, who only tolerates him to get Sabbath's address. When the mummy finally finds its way to Hazel, his destruction of it is startling, but not out of character. Hazel is complex in that he does not fit as neatly into symbolic categories as easily as others in the novel do. As O'Connor says herself in the preface to *Wise Blood*, Hazel's integrity lies in his not being able to shake the idea of Jesus out of his head (3BFO 2). Though he stubbornly clings to some aspects of his materialistic culture (like his car) and is certainly affected by advertisements he does not realize are guiding him in the wrong direction, he is not the adamant disbeliever he insists everyone think he is, and he refuses to be the believer he *actually* is. Though at times oblivious to the emptiness of the material, he is that much more intolerant of that shallowness when it comes to religion. Despite his ranting, it is not *belief* that angers him about modern religion, but *pretense of belief*. I believe it is this hypocrisy that he senses in Asa Hawkes immediately when he wonders why a preacher would not try to save an obviously “lost soul” like himself. Indeed, Hazel, from the start of the novel

when he is making unprovoked statements to various passengers on the train, to his question to Asa Hawkes, and then to random drivers he meets on the road, and finally to his money-obsessed landlady, actually is *daring*, and *wanting* the commercialized culture to prove him wrong about the faith he is blaspheming to anyone that will listen. Thus, the angry destruction of what he sees as a mockery of Jesus is not an unexpected reaction from him. His shattering of the “new jesus” is nothing short of iconoclasm, as Steve Pinkerton points out. It is a “sacrilege perpetrated against a vacuously sacralized religion of commodity worship and playacting, a religion divorced from ultimate reality and thus condemned to act out of false versions of it. He refuses to play the father to this doll-like jesus, to be joseph to Sabbath's mary, to revere anything like the lower-case “god” that blesses Enoch with a gorilla costume” (460).

What do we make then of Hazel's dependence on his car, a major symbol in *Wise Blood*, especially as it relates to materialism and the New American Dream? It is important to keep in mind that while O'Connor was writing *Wise Blood* American was in the midst of a love affair with the automobile and car production was at its height. Between 1950 and 1960, the number of registered automobiles in the U.S. went from 40.3 to 61.5 million (Snowman 126-27). O'Connor saw the automobile becoming what it still often represents today – a symbol of materialistic worship. For O'Connor, it was the perfect emblem of a culture that was losing its spiritual direction and misplacing its priorities.

In terms of reducing Hazel's Essex to its symbolism, the opinions seem as varied as the critical analyses they come from. Margaret Earley Whitt, for instance, sees the car as an extension of Haze himself:

When Haze becomes a preacher, the car is his means to reach the arbitrary church site, his place to preach from, and his way to depart. Here, too, is Haze's double. The car is as good as Haze is. When Haze finds out from one mechanic that the car cannot be put in "the best order," he drives to another who promises what Haze wants to hear – about himself and his car: that it was a "good car to begin with... with good materials in it" (24).

But at other times, the car is given animal-like characteristics. It is described as "rat-colored," and has having "bulging headlights." In other instances, it is referred to in the same coffin-like terms Haze reacts against in the pitch black train compartment. And Haze himself tells the auto dealer that the car will double as a home. The truth, I believe lies in taking into account all of the various allusions. The car, for the spiritually hungry Haze, takes the place not of home, or calling, or final rest, or self-realization, but the collection of all of these things. It is meant to fill a spiritual void that Haze, until the end of the novel, refuses to acknowledge.

Mark Schiebe, however, in his essay "Car Trouble: Hazel Motes and the Fifties Counterculture," sees it primarily as a symbol of freedom:

Indeed, the notion that the car provides a means of escape from Taulkinham (he can always go preach in another city) is central to his determination to free himself from his past : from his preacher grandfather's influence, from his memories of the war, and from the ragged figure who moves from tree to tree in the back of his

mind. In hearing for the first time that the preacher Asa Hawks blinded himself as a sign of faith in the healing powers of Jesus, Haze hides his curiosity and shame behind a staunch faith in his car : “Nobody with a good car needs to be justified” (409).

But if the car represents only a means of escape to Hazel, wouldn't the train that brought him to Taulkinham do just as well in that regard? For Hazel, the car is not only a means of escape from “the ragged figure who moves from tree to tree in the back of his mind,” it is something he has decided on as a *substitute* for Christ's presence – another marketing and advertising fostered false idol. Were it only a means of escape for him, Hazel would not have had the epiphany he had when it was taken away from him. It is significant that the policeman that takes away Hazel's last vestige of false faith uses the *past* tense to ask him “Was you going anywheres?” When Hazel answers “No,” he seems to be realizing he had *never been* going “anywheres.” Furthermore, when the car is taken away from him, Hazel realizes it is his “physical vision” that has led him in the wrong direction, and his only recourse is to remove the sight that is getting in the way of “spiritual vision.”

After Hazel blinds himself, O'Connor brings the character of Mrs. Flood to the forefront. In limiting, for the most part, the last part of the book to the interaction between just these two characters, O'Connor outlines them more clearly. Hazel's penitential extremism seems all the more intense against Mrs. Flood's secular pragmatism. Conversely, it is Hazel's irrationally devout behavior that makes Mrs. Flood's shallow preoccupation with money more pronounced. Indeed, it seems as though O'Connor is using Mrs. Flood's avarice to make one

last comment on money-obsessed culture. The oft-used O'Connor motif of vision is employed here again as it links Mrs. Flood to her fascination with Hazel. We know that Mrs. Flood is obsessed with the idea that “there might be something valuable hidden near her, something she couldn't see” (3BFO 110). That *something* rests in Hazel's eyes, the eyes “without any bottom in them” that both repulse and attract her. As Steve Pinkerton astutely points out Mrs. Flood “sees in those eyes something clearly akin to what Mrs. Wally Bee Hitchcock saw there: a refutation of the world of surfaces to which she belongs, and an implied repudiation of her whole system of values” (Pinkerton 466). When O'Connor tells us that Mrs. Flood “didn't like the thought that something was being put over her head. She liked the clear light of day. She liked to see things” (3BFO 113), it is nothing deeper than the material and superficial that she is talking about. Anything that does not have material value or does not translate into monetary profit of some kind escapes her reason. Her reaction to finding dollar bills thrown away in Hazel's waste basket speaks volumes about her character:

One day when she was cleaning his room, she found four dollar bills and some change in his trash can. He came in about that time from one of his walks. “Mr. Motes,” she said, “here's a dollar bill and some change in this waste basket. You know where your waste basket is. How did you make that mistake?”

“It was left over,” he said, “I didn't need it.”

She dropped onto his straight chair. “Do you throw it away every month?” she asked after a time.

“Only when it's left over,” he said...

She realized now that he was a mad man and that he ought to be under the control of a sensible person (3BFO 113-14).

For Mrs. Flood, who worships only money, the ultimate madness is someone *not* worshipping it. Blinding oneself with quicklime, walking with rocks in one's shoes, wrapping one's body in barbed wire all pale in comparison to the irrationality of throwing money into a wastebasket. As Henry T. Edmondson explains ...

Here is Hazel's culminating profanation. From the standpoint of modern American dogma—whether conceived as the American Way of Life, the Protestant work ethic, the 'American Religion,' or the overriding dogma of capitalism—such willful disposal of legal tender is a capital crime in more ways than one, a virtually inexplicable sacrilege against capital itself" (463).

As a representative of the spiritually impoverished culture that cannot fathom the idea of spiritual atonement, Mrs. Flood is unable to understand Hazel's motives: "Who's he doing this for? she asked herself. What's he getting out of doing it? Every now and then she would get an intimation of something hidden near her but out of her reach" (3BFO 115).

While there has been much disagreement among critics as to whether Hazel Motes actually comes to any sort of divine Revelation or whether his blinding himself is just the last in a series of misguided and irrational gestures, Hazel's actions makes sense in the context of what O'Connor is trying to say about a society operating under capitalist, rather than Christian, ideals. Hazel refers to his penitent acts as if they were bills that were overdue. His only response to Mrs.

Flood's asking him why he walks with rocks in his shoes is "I got to pay." When she asks him "Pay for what?" he can only answer "It don't make any difference for what. I'm paying" (3BFO 115). Immersed in a culture of commodity, this language suggests that that culture has him brainwashed to the extent that he still does not fully understand the concept of Christian grace. Everything around him (advertising signs, billboards, street salesmen, prostitutes) tells Hazel that everything is a business transaction that requires payment. Even the last words he hears makes that message clear: "You got to pay your rent first," the policeman said, "Ever' bit of it!" Of course Hazel has paid his rent and then some. But this is not just thrown in to the novel for irony by O'Connor. The author's message here is very clear: In a culture centered on commodity and bereft of spirituality, no amount of material wealth will ever be enough to fill the void left by real faith. And without "spiritual vision," we are left to rely on a deceptive "physical vision" that leaves us prey to an increasingly commercialized marketplace society.

## 2. THE AUTOMOBILE AND MATERIALISM IN "THE LIFE YOU SAVE MAY BE YOUR OWN

O'Connor's preoccupation with automobiles shows up again in the short story "The Life You Save May Be Your Own." As in *Wise Blood*, we have a character who puts all his faith in an automobile. Tom T. Shiftlet is a drifter who comes walking up the road to Mrs. Lucynell Crater's house as she and her deaf/mute, mentally challenged daughter (also named Lucynell), are sitting on the porch. Even before introductions, Shiftlet's eyes are sizing up the Crater property and seize upon the Ford half-hidden in a shed: "Mr. Shiftlet's pale sharp glance had already passed over everything in the yard – the pump near the corner of the house and the big fig tree that three or four chickens were preparing to roost in – and had moved to a shed where he saw the square rusted back of an automobile" (TCS 146).

Even as he introduces himself, he is "looking at the tires" and O'Connor cleverly lets us know that Shiftlet is already obsessed with the car as he starts to sermonize:

"Lady," he said, "nowadays people will do anything anyways. I can tell you my name is Tom T. Shiftlet and I come from Tarwater, Tennessee, but you never seen me before; how you know I ain't lying? How you know my name ain't Aaron Sparks, lady, and I come from Singleberry, Georgia, or how you know it's not George Speeds and I come from Lucy, Alabama, or how you know I ain't Thompson Bright from Toolafalls, Mississippi?" (TCS 147-48)

Shiftlet's seemingly random choices for aliases ("Sparks," "Speeds," "Bright") on closer inspection, are not so random. They all make reference to



automobiles. Shiftlet's obsession with the Ford is all-consuming. We are told that "He had always wanted an automobile, but he had never been able to afford one before" (TCS 154). Douglas Davis, in fact, refers to "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" as a "story about a man who falls in love with a car" in his essay "Shiftlet's Choice: O'Connor's Fordist Love Story." He goes on to tie this "romance" in with the consumerist culture of the 1950's:

...in O'Connor's hands this innocent, all-American scenario becomes a grotesque story about desire deflected in terrifying, inhuman ways that reveals the unspoken political truth of postwar America's consumer society... Shiftlet is O'Connor's model modern American, a conflicted figure driven to find meaning and satisfaction in things but also driven by a sense that the things he desires are essentially meaningless. The story of Shiftlet's choice of a Ford over his wife is a fable about the terrifying kind of person that the American worker has become: a consumer (169-70).

But while Davis is correct in pointing out the materialistic tendencies that began to define the postwar era, he strays too far from O'Connor's essential message. O'Connor saw Shiftlet's "love affair" with the Ford as reflective of the general American obsession with the automobile, yes. But she saw this obsession as detrimental because it was, more broadly, a symptom of something much more troublesome to O'Connor – the fact that consumerism in general was beginning to take the place of spirituality in America. Shiftlet himself certainly seemed to confuse the two:

“Lady, a man is divided into two parts, body and spirit.”

The old woman clamped her gums together.

“A body and a spirit,” he repeated. “The body, lady, is like a house: it don’t go anywhere; but the spirit, lady, is like a automobile: always on the move, always...” (TCS 152)

Shiftlet eventually does acquire the Ford he so covets, at poor Lucynell’s expense. After subtle bargaining between he and Mrs. Crater, he agrees to marry Lucynell if she pays for car parts and paint, and gives him 17.50 for a proper honeymoon. Shiftlet winds up abandoning Lucynell in a diner and takes off with the car to Mobile.

Throughout the story, Lucynell is associated with innocence and Christian imagery. Her eyes are described as being “as blue as a peacock’s neck” and the waiter at the diner murmurs “She looks like an angel of Gawd.” As a symbol of Christian grace, she is offered to Shiftlet, who abandons her for the material – the car he has always wanted, but was never able to afford. As Carter W. Martin points out in *The True Country: Themes in the Fiction of Flannery O’Connor*, Lucynell is not simply a symbol of Grace, she represents a *choice* for someone with “moral intelligence”:

Lucynell is also Mr. Shiftlet’s opportunity to *accept* Grace – an opportunity which he rejects. His complete awareness of his action is indicated by his transference of the waiter’s phrase from Lucynell to his mother, all the while thinking of his abandonment of the girl: “My mother was an angel of Gawd... He took her from

heaven and giver to me and I left her.” As the title of the story indicates, it is not Lucynell’s life that he must save, but his own (88).

Shiftlet is correct when he proclaims that he has a “moral intelligence.” O’Connor endows her character with this trait to emphasize how even someone who is cognizant enough to sense the presence of evil (“Nothing is like it used to be lady,” he said. “The world is almost rotten.”), can have his morality confused, and be led astray, by material things. Shiftlet tells himself that “He felt too that a man with a car had a responsibility to others and he kept his eye out for a hitchhiker. Occasionally he saw a sign that warned: ‘Drive Carefully. The life you save may be your own’ ” (TCS 155).

Shiftlet doesn’t see the irony in his feeling he owes hitchhikers a ride because having a car means you have a “responsibility” to others, when he has just abandoned helpless Lucynell at a diner. If the spirit (or soul) really is like an automobile, he is not using it in a very responsible way. Even when the warnings are coming from all directions, Shiftlet does not quite get the message. In an interesting twist, O’Connor uses the very agents of commercialism – billboards – to get her message across to a character blinded by that commercialism: Drive Carefully. It is your own soul you put at risk when you put your faith in the material.

“The Life You Save May Be Your Own” is unique among O’Connor’s short stories, however, in that she gives us *two* characters who are deluded by materialism. The second is Mrs. Crater, who is concerned only with her

homestead and getting a husband for her daughter. Though her intentions become obvious to the reader, O'Connor tells us unequivocally that "she was ravenous for a son-in-law." Even her name suggests an enormous spiritual void. It conjures up images of the moon's arid craters. This takes on even deeper symbolism when we consider how often O'Connor uses the sun to suggest God's presence. When Mr. Shiftlet, moved by the beautiful sunset, exclaims that he would "give a fortune to live where I could see me a sun do that every evening," Mrs. Crater answers matter-of-factly, "Does it every evening." She is faithless, oblivious to God's presence, and as spiritually cavernous as her name implies. Indeed, it is through her dialogue with Mr. Shiftlet that this aspect of her character is best revealed. Whenever Shiftlet tries to discuss the spiritual or metaphysical, Mrs. Crater becomes impatient and tries to steer the conversation back to the concrete and practical. When Mrs. Crater tells him she can offer him food and a place to sleep but cannot afford to pay him, Shiftlet begins a lecture on capital that elicits a typical response from Mrs. Crater:

"Lady," he said slowly, "there's some men that some things mean more to them than money." The old woman rocked without comment and the daughter watched the trigger that moved up and down in his neck. He told the old woman then that all most people were interested in was money, but he asked what a man was made for. He asked her if a man was made for money, or what. He asked her what she thought she was made for, but she didn't

answer, she only sat rocking and wondered if a one-armed man could put a new roof on her garden house (TCS 148).

For her, then, the automobile becomes a bargaining chip to get what she wants – the improvement of her property and the son-in-law she is so “ravenous” for. But more importantly, it becomes a representation of the unholy compact between herself and Shiftlet that leaves Lucynell a cruelly discarded afterthought.

While Mrs. Crater is constantly pointing out how much she values her daughter, we become increasingly more suspicious of her gushing pronouncements. Her descriptions of her daughter actually wind up making her sound less like a proud mother and more like a woman trying to sell an old lamp at a garage sale. One cannot help but notice that Mrs. Crater always describes Lucynell in terms of *materially* valuable things. She claims that she “wouldn’t give her up for a casket of jewels,” and tells Shiftlet that he “got a prize” after she marries her off at the courthouse. For Mrs. Crater, everything is seen in terms of potential commodity, even her daughter.

But if we focus on Mrs. Crater as the character filling a spiritual void with the temporal, the character of Shiftlet has to be examined in a different light. He then takes on the role of catalyst or instigator and makes Mrs. Crater’s character traits more defined. It makes sense then that O’Connor would set him up as a kind of twisted Christ-figure that drives and encourages those tendencies. His first action after tipping his hat to Mrs. Crater and Lucynell in greeting, is to strike a pose almost announcing himself as such:

He turned his back and faced the sunset. He swung both his whole and his short arm up slowly so that they indicated an expanse of sky and his figure formed a crooked cross. The old woman watched him with her arms folded across her chest as if she were the owner of the sun... He held the post for almost fifty seconds and then he picked up his box and came on to the porch and dropped down on the bottom step (TCS 146).

His “box” we find out very soon after, contains tools, and he tells Mrs. Crater that he is a carpenter. When he finally gets the automobile running, Shiftlet is described as having “an expression of serious modesty on his face as if he had just raised the dead” (TCS 151).

Yet at other times he is described with devil-like imagery. As soon as Mrs. Crater agrees to pay for the car to be painted, and Shiftlet realizes the evil bargain between them has been sealed, O’Connor tells us “In the darkness, Mr. Shiftlet’s smile stretched like a weary snake, waking up by a fire” (TCS 152).

Melita Shaum, in one of the more interesting interpretations of Shiftlet’s place in the story, has labeled him an archetypal “trickster.” As such, he is less a symbol of evil than he is an agent of chaos and, ultimately, necessary change. As Shaum elaborates more fully...

O’Connor’s Trickster poses as a *spiritual* confidence man – liar, thief, smooth operator, the injector of disorder and bankruptor of souls – yet he is himself as often as not comically evil, snared by

his own devices, and unwittingly conscripted into the service of divine good. Moreover, by breaking the rigid and sterile orders of misplaced human pride, righteousness, egoism, or appetitive greed, he becomes the disruptive force that paradoxically makes possible social and spiritual renewal (3).

Shiftlet's appearance does indeed illuminate Mrs. Crater's true character. Her double dealing with Shiftlet shows her for the greedy, shallow, dishonest woman that she is. But as provocative as Shaum's theory is, the Trickster comparison breaks down, I believe, in the description of him as *amoral* rather than *immoral*. Shiftlet's tears at the end of the story suggest he is very much aware of what he has done, even though he cannot quite bring himself to face it.

Though it is Lucynell, symbol of innocence and offered grace, that is tossed aside because of materialistic greed, O'Connor's message is given clearly even before the story begins. The real souls in danger are those of Mr. Shiftlet and Mrs. Crater who, in collusion, are blinded by their own selfish desires.

### 3. "AFTER ALL, THIS IS MY PLACE": PROPERTY AND POSSESSION IN "A CIRCLE IN THE FIRE"

The character of the widowed property-owning matriarch is a recurring one in O'Connor's fiction, one she used often to exemplify the pre-occupation with the material. The protagonists of "A Circle in the Fire," "Greenleaf," and "The Displaced Person" are all examples of self-satisfied women who make a pretense of living by Christian tenets, but are focused exclusively on their possessions and land. All are portrayed by O'Connor as worshipping property and the wealth attached to it while being blind to the spiritual, and moreover, as lacking real Christian empathy for other human beings.

In "A Circle in the Fire", we are introduced to our main character Mrs. Cope as she is attacking weeds in her garden. We are told that she "worked at the weeds and nut grass as if they were an evil sent directly by the devil to destroy the place" (TCS 175). This of course makes perfect sense in relation to her character. If one is worshipping a piece of land, one would consider weeds the ultimate evil.

We are also introduced to Mrs. Cope's daughter, Sally Virginia, "a pale fat girl of twelve with a frowning squint and a large mouth full of silver bands" (TCS 181), Melita Schaum sees Mrs. Cope's daughter as a kind of parody of her mother's materialistic egocentric landowner:

Sally Virginia, a juvenile copy of her mother, bullies the trees in childish make-believe, ordering them to bow to her imaginary dominion: " 'Line up, LINE UP!' she said and waved one of the pistols at a cluster of long bare-trunked pines, four times her



height, as she passed them.” The scene represents a marvelous parody of Mrs. Cope’s own ordering of “her things,” of everything and everyone about the farm, attempting to bully people, animals, and objects alike into obedience under her control. From a penned bull to a weed-free garden, order is crucial to Mrs. Cope, but O’Connor seems to suggest that we can put to the mother the same question she sneeringly asks Sally Virginia when the child straps on her toy holster and strides off to survey her pretend-empire: “When are you going to grow up?” (18)

We also meet Mrs. Pritchard, hired help who is obsessed with bodily functions and any news that has to do with the disfigurement, disease, or grotesqueness of the human body. Mrs. Pritchard certainly functions, on one level, as comic relief – her fascination with a news story of a woman who conceived and gave birth while in an iron lung is one of the funnier scenes in the story – but she is also Mrs. Cope’s counterpart in a significant way; they are both pre-occupied with the earthly and the corporeal. Their Christianity is cosmetic and superficial. Mrs. Cope claims to say a prayer of thanksgiving every day and condescendingly asks Mrs. Pritchard if she does the same, but her words ring hollow. She obviously believes any success she has had is not due to the grace of God, but “because I work.” Her prayers of thanksgiving seem like nothing more than a tally of her possessions.

Mrs. Cope was bent over, digging fiercely at the nut grass again.

“We have a lot to be thankful for,” she said. “Every day you

should say a prayer of thanksgiving. Do you do that?"

"Yes'm," Mrs. Pritchard said. ..

"Every day I say a prayer of thanksgiving," Mrs. Cope said.

"Think of all we have. Lord," she said and sighed, "we have everything," and she looked around at her rich pastures and hills heavy with timber and shook her head as if it might all be a burden she was trying to shake off her back (TCS 177).

The choice of words here is telling. Mrs. Cope sees the trees on her property as only "timber" – what trees are called when they are a commodity. Just like the pastures that she sees as "rich," they are important only for the profit they represent. Rufel F. Ramos also recognizes something conspicuous about the language used throughout the story – it is always about ownership: "Mrs. Cope is proud of her hard work and the results of that hard work, that is, her property: "her wood", "her Negroes", "her place". She is like Everyman, relying on her virtues and her material goods as signs of her salvation (173).

"A Circle in the Fire" also heavily utilizes a familiar motif in O'Connor's fiction - that of the sun as a symbol of God's presence. Along with the symbols of fire and light associated with it, it becomes an important device in the story. It is indicative of their true spiritual selves, for instance, that Mrs. Cope and Mrs. Pritchard both wear wide-brimmed sunhats as they work outside to shield themselves from the sunlight. The hats are emblematic of their unwillingness to notice God's warnings, which are represented by the increasingly more intense colors of the daytime sky as the story goes on. The first line of the story describes

the sunlight behind the tree line as “a livid glaring white.” Soon after, we meet the story’s antagonists, Powell Boyd, Garfield Smith, and W.T. Harper, as they come walking up the road with suitcases to greet Mrs. Cope. Powell’s father had once worked for Mrs. Cope and the boy remembers and describes the homestead in Eden-like terms. Powell tells her that his father has since died and they now live in squalor in an Atlanta housing development, but Mrs. Cope is concerned only that their cigarette butts may start a fire or that one of them might “get hurt on her place and sue her for everything she had” (TCS 180). As Mrs. Cope becomes gradually more anxious about her visitors, she also becomes more selfish, and protective of her property. When she brings out a plate of sandwiches for the boys, she notices that the sun has become “swollen and flame-colored and hung in a net of ragged cloud as if it might burn through any second and fall into the woods” (TCS 184). The Sun alters again in intensity after Mrs. Cope repeats her hypocritical thanksgiving mantra first recited to Mrs. Pritchard:

“We have so much to be thankful for,” she said suddenly in a mournful marveling tone.

“Do you boys thank God every night for all He’s done for you? Do you thank Him for everything?”

This put an instant hush over them. They bit into the sandwiches as if they had lost all taste for food.

“Do you?” she persisted.

They were as silent as thieves hiding. They chewed without a sound.

“Well, I know I do,” she said at length and turned and went back into the house and the child watched their shoulders drop. The large one stretched his legs out as if he were releasing himself from a trap. The sun burned so fast that it seemed to be trying to set everything in sight on fire” (TCS 184).

Frederick Asals, in *Flannery O’Connor: The Imagination of Extremity*, sees the growing ferocity of the Sun as a metaphor for the gradually intensifying conflict between the boys and Mrs. Cope, pointing out that it ...

parallels the developing antagonism between the farm dwellers and the invading city boys. Yet this hostility is itself rooted in the obsessive fears and negations of the farm owner, Mrs. Cope... which in turn evokes the boys’ latent destructiveness; and the atmosphere of impending violence is further heightened by dialogue given over to discussions of fires, hurricanes, European boxcars, iron lungs, guns, fighting, stealing, and poisoning. When the story bursts into the climactic fire, that outcome immediately seems right, if not inescapable (135).

But Asals misses the real point if he sees the sun’s gradual metamorphosis as simply mirroring a steadily building battle of wills. The sun is not merely a reflection of the conflict between Mrs. Cope and three juvenile delinquents; both the boys and the sun are acting as God’s messengers. The climactic fire that the boys set at the end of the story is indeed inescapable, but not because of building conflict. It is because the message of salvation has until then, failed to get through

to Mrs. Cope. As with most of O'Connor's stubbornly deluded protagonists, it takes an event that is catastrophic and final for her eyes to be opened. The three boys are the prophetic messengers sent to deliver the revelatory final blow after all the other unheeded warnings. In one scene, Mrs. Cope again tries to insist on her dominion being recognized. She reminds the boys again that "After all... this is my place," and only notices the rude response, not the dire warning again being conveyed to her: "The big boy made some ambiguous noise and they turned and walked off toward the barn, leaving her there with at shocked look as if she had had a searchlight thrown on her in the middle of the night (TCS 186).

Just as she wears a hat to keep the sun's admonitory rays at bay, so does she miss the message that the "searchlight" is trying to send. God's message finally does get delivered with the help of the three boys who light Mrs. Cope's woods on fire, ostensibly in God's name as prophets. The last line of the story makes it clear that the three were sent as messengers as a last effort at opening the eyes of our main character: "She stood taut, listening, and could just catch in the distance a few wild high shrieks of joy as if the prophets were dancing in the fiery furnace, in the circle the angel had cleared for them" (TCS 193).

This ending is an obvious reference to the book of Daniel and the three prophets (Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego) who remain unscathed after they are thrown into the fiery furnace by King Nebuchadnezzar. The Biblical passages in this book are worth examining more closely as they help illuminate O'Connor's intent. Daniel 4:4 is significant, for instance, in that it mirrors Mrs. Cope's attitude. It reads "I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at ease in my house and prospering in

my palace” (Dan 4:4 ESV). Like the Babylonian king, Mrs. Cope is at ease in her house, that is, complacent in her material wealth and prosperity.

Smug in his growing wealth and increasingly more arrogant and prideful, Nebuchadnezzar has a golden idol created, and in Daniel 3:16-18, the three prophets are instructed to kneel and supplicate themselves to Nebuchadnezzar’s false god or be sentenced to burn to death in a fiery furnace:

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego answered and said to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. <sup>17</sup> If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. <sup>18</sup> But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up.” (Daniel 3:16-18 NKJV)

Like the three prophets who refuse to acknowledge the gold image, the boys refuse to acknowledge the false idols of property and possessions that Mrs. Cope surrounds herself with. In their own way, they continually let Mrs. Cope know that they will not serve her “gods.” When Hollis, Mrs. Cope’s hired man, confronts the boys about smoking in her woods, the smallest boy, W.T., tells him “Man, Gawd owns them woods and her too” (TCS 186).

As with many O’Connor short stories, we are left to wonder exactly what the main character does at the turning point she is confronted with. There is every indication, in Mrs. Cope’s case, that she has had some kind of epiphany. When

her greatest fear is realized and it is clear she is about to lose the property and possessions she defines herself by, she is left with nothing but herself. Her daughter, Sally Virginia, is the one to translate this for the reader:

The child came to a stop beside her mother and stared up at her face as if she had never seen it before. It was the face of the new misery she felt, but on her mother it looked old and it looked as if it might have belonged to anybody, a Negro or a European or to Powell himself. (TCS 193)

What Sally Virginia notices in her mother's countenance is the Christian empathy that up until then had been absent in Mrs. Cope. Confronted with personal loss and devastation, she is finally able to feel a part of humanity. Marion Montgomery, in his essay "O'Connor and Teilhard de Chardin: The Problem of Evil," sees de Chardin's influence on O'Connor at work in the story's conclusion. According to Montgomery, de Chardin would see the evil that the boys would represent as cleansing. It is only after the complete destruction by purifying fire that true salvation can occur. Spiritual wholeness can only arrive when all is stripped away (40-42). This is the precipice at which we, as readers, leave Mrs. Cope.

#### 4. UNBEARABLE LIGHT: SPIRITUAL BLINDNESS AND MATERIALISM IN "GREENLEAF"

In “Greenleaf” we find another prideful, spiritually barren land owner in the main character, Mrs. May. Like Mrs. Cope, it is Mrs. May’s possessions that not only define her, but lull her into a false sense of self-satisfaction. We are told that “The pastures were enough to calm her. When she looked out any window in her house, she saw the reflection of her own character” (TCS 321). It is not the tranquility of nature that actually calms her, but her own ego. Control and dominion take the place of true spirituality.

While disruption of a complacent and hollow spirituality comes in the form of three delinquents in “A Circle in the Fire,” in “Greenleaf”, it arrives in the form of a wandering bull. The bull belongs to the Greenleafs, antagonists to our main character. The Greenleaf patriarch, Mr. Greenleaf, has worked on Mrs. May’s dairy farm for fifteen years and has been a source of vexation for her just as long. His wife is even more repellent to Mrs. May. Mrs. Greenleaf indulges in dramatic ritual healing that involves cutting out stories from newspapers of people she feels need her prayers, burying them in the dirt, and then praying loudly over them.

Their twin sons, who own the errant bull, have become successful dairy farmers in their own right and are a contrast to Mrs. May’s own useless and disrespectful sons. Her resentment of the Greenleaf boys is, she has convinced herself, a warranted dismissal of their cultural inferiority. She is a typically blind O’Connor protagonist in that she does not realize her resentment is actually rooted in some very un-Christian attitudes – in this case, jealousy and pride. This blindness leads, of course, to her eventual epiphanic death at the hands of their bull.



Unlike Mrs. Cope, though, it is not simply property and money that Mrs. May puts her faith in, but the social order and purity that she insists go hand and hand with those things. The Greenleaf bull encroaching on her land represents the breaking down of the class barriers Mrs. May clings to so desperately. Her description of the dream she wakes from at the beginning of the story is indicative of her fear of losing, not only her property, but the social standing she believes she is entitled to:

She had been conscious in her sleep of a steady rhythmic chewing as if something were eating one wall of the house. She had been aware that whatever it was had been eating as long as she had had the place and had eaten everything from the beginning of her fence line up to the house and now was eating the house and calmly with the same steady rhythm would continue through the house, eating her and the boys, and then on, eating everything but the Greenleafs, on and on, eating everything until nothing was left but the Greenleafs on a little island all their own in the middle of what had been her place (TCS 312).

Her fear is that the Greenleafs, and people like them, will upend the social structure that Mrs. May finds so comfortable. She voices her fears at one point to her indifferent sons:

If the war had made anyone, Mrs. May said, it had made the Greenleaf boys. They each had three little children apiece, who spoke Greenleaf English and French, and who, on account of their

mothers' background, would be sent to the convent school and brought up with manners. "And in twenty years," Mrs. May asked Scofield and Wesley, "do you know what those people will be?" "*Society*," she said blackly (TCS 318).

But what is unique about this short story among O'Connor's work is that it steps outside the boundaries of the Christian symbolism the writer usually confines herself to. The secular and mythical are negotiated alongside Christian imagery to delineate a decidedly Christian message. The Greenleafs, for example, are associated with the earth, sexuality and fertility, and, most importantly, the *spiritual*. They are set up as a contrast to Mrs. May's limited self-absorbed materialistic attributes. Mr. Greenleaf for instance has put up with Mrs. May's snide remarks and insults about his family for fifteen years, because he is not part of her egocentric world-view. Jane Marston, in her essay "Epistemology and the Solipsistic Consciousness in Flannery O'Connor's 'Greenleaf'," sees Mr. Greenleaf's literal physical circular movements as reflective of his existing in a reality that has something higher than Mrs. May at its center:

Reality, for Mrs. May, is defined by the radius of the circle which has her ego, not God, for its center. Thus Mr. Greenleaf, who throughout the story resists Mrs. May's attempts to dominate him, dwells almost beyond the borders of her will: "He walked on the perimeter of some invisible circle"; "she saw him approaching on the outside of some invisible circle." O'Connor again uses the image of the circle, this time to record Mrs. May's isolation from

God and nature, when she describes the arc made by the passing of the sun: “[Mrs. May] became aware after a time that... the sun [was] trying to burn through the tree line and she stopped to watch, safe in the knowledge that it couldn’t, that it had to sink the way it always did outside of her property” (377).

But it is Mrs. Greenleaf who is the most glaring contrast to Mrs. May in this sense. Here, O’Connor ties in spirituality with sexuality, as illustrated by Mrs. Greenleaf’s healing ritual. Mrs. May is horrified first at hearing “Jesus! Jesus!” voiced out loud:

Mrs. May stopped still, one hand lifted to her throat. The sound was so piercing that she felt as if some violent unleashed force had broken out of the ground and was charging toward her. Her second thought was more reasonable: somebody had been hurt on the place and would sue her for everything she had. She had no insurance (TCS 316).

Mrs. May winces as she hears Mrs. Greenleaf repeating “Jesus, Jesus.” We are told that she “thought the word, Jesus, should be kept inside the church building like other words inside the bedroom” (TCS 316). (It is also telling that her second, “more reasonable” thought is for her wealth and property.)

Mrs. May comes running to find Mrs. Greenleaf on the ground shrieking “Jesus, stab me in the heart!” and then falling back in the dirt, “a huge human mound, her legs and arms spread out as if she were trying to wrap them around

the earth” (TCS 317). Mrs. May is horrified at Mrs. Greenleaf’s behavior and sees her as beneath her socially, but Mrs. Greenleaf, eccentric as she is, is Christian in her impulses. Her only motivation for her prayer healing is to selflessly pray for the souls of those she finds in need. Her charity is genuine, yet Mrs. May sees only a neglectful and dirty woman and dismisses her as someone Jesus would be embarrassed by. Contrast this with the description of Mrs. May who, O’Connor tells us, “was a good Christian woman with a large respect for religion, though she did not, of course, believe any of it was true.” (TCS 316) Even the word “respect” suggests a comfortable distance. It is obvious that Mrs. May’s Christianity is merely for display – she is only as devout as she needs to be to seem respectable in polite Southern society and is completely lacking in any genuine spirituality.

And not only do Mrs. Greenleaf’s proclamations tie her to both nature and the spiritual, they also ironically foreshadow Mrs. May’s death: despite Mrs. Greenleaf’s sacrificial entreaties, it is Mrs. May who is actually stabbed in the heart by, if not Jesus, then by his symbolic agent in the story. This also seems to me to be a divine response to Mrs. May’s arrogance in proclaiming later in the story that she would “die when I get good and ready” (TCS 321).

The Greenleafs are associated with nature because they are fertile, not just in the literal sense (they have created sons, daughters, and grandchildren) but are also productive in every sense. The sons have taken advantage of a free education to improve their livelihood, have married seemingly above their social class, and have built an increasingly successful business. This is in contrast to Mrs. May,

who insists on sterility around her. Changing her will in fear that her sons will “marry trash and ruin everything I’ve done,” she, in effect, keeps them sterile. Likewise, her main reason for wanting the Greenleaf bull pent up is the fear that he will “contaminate” her herd of cows by breeding with them. To Mrs. May, he is a realization of everything she fears impinging on her aseptic universe.

But the bull is not simply a symbol of disruption. He is also an agent of enlightenment. It is here especially that O’Connor deftly weaves in mythology with Christian allegory. The Christian symbolism is probably the most expected, if not the most obvious. When Mrs. May wakes from her dream to find the bull actually beneath her window, he is described in Christ-as-bridegroom imagery. He stands at the window “like some patient god come down to woo her... with a hedge-wreath that he had ripped loose for himself caught in the tips of his horns” (TCS 311). Later, he looks to Mrs. May “... like an uncouth country suitor.” And just before Mrs. May closes the blinds on him, the bull “... lowered his head and shook it and the wreath slipped down to the base of his horns where it looked like a menacing prickly crown” (TCS 312).

Frederick Asals sees the bull’s arrival as a final warning sent to a character who refuses to acknowledge God’s presence and a need for salvation:

“Greenleaf” centers around a scrub bull invested with clear symbolic significance, and ... although the language of love that O’Connor borrows from the mystics and the Song of Songs identifies Mrs. May as the bride of Christ, it is a role she fatally resists. The bull thus turns from the “patient god come down to

woo her” of his first appearance to the “wild tormented lover” of the story’s climax, his two horns simultaneously embracing and killing her... love and vengeance seem to be one, and the cost of Mrs. May’s revelation measures the fullness of her denial: she is the only O’Connor character who pays for her vision with her life. (223)

John C. Shields, however, insists that it is the ancient Greek myth of *Europa and the Bull* that O’Connor weaves in with Christian symbolism that makes the story work. In the Greek myth, Zeus, disguised as a bull, abducts a beautiful maiden and takes her away to the island of Crete, introducing cattle to the world. The legend is, at heart, a fertility myth. In “Greenleaf,” Shields explains, it is fertility that Mrs. May is desperate to arrest:

What is ironic here is not only the distortion or grotesque of the myth but also Mrs. May’s determination to thwart nature’s irreversible life and death cycle by keeping her herd “pure” and thus unregenerate. For her pride in thinking she can interfere with the birth, death, and rebirth rhythm of nature’s ongoing creativity and for her disbelief in the irrepressible value of that process, Mrs. May pays with her life. It is in her commission of the sin of pride, her complacent disbelief, and in her subsequent but inexorable punishment by the bull that the classical myth most clearly blends with the expression of divine retribution for the worst of Christianity’s deadly sins (422).

Asals and Shields are both correct. Thus, the “hedge-wreath” the bull has wrapped around a horn in his first visit to Mrs. May not only references classical mythology, it also references Christian mythos as a symbol of Christ’s crown of thorns. O’Connor pulls from both the classical/mythological as well as the Christian and then adds yet another layer of symbolism - it also represents a rampart between herself and people like the Greenleafs. The wreath is a part of the barrier (both literal and symbolic) set up by Mrs. May to protect both her property and social status that the bull has torn through and is now showing her as an offering.

The concluding scene, and especially the last line, of “Greenleaf” have provoked some disagreement among critics as to the extent to which Mrs. May’s experience is revelatory. As Mrs. May waits on the bumper of her car for Mr. Greenleaf, the bull comes charging toward her. We are told that she “... remained perfectly still, not in fright but in a freezing unbelief.” The implication is that Mrs. May still cannot “see” God’s warning sign even as “One of his horns sank until it pierced her heart and the other curved around her side and held her in an unbreakable grip.” Miles Orvell, at one extreme, goes so far as to call Mrs. May’s death by goring a “happy ending” because the bull as agent of Christ “has at last gained his mark” (27). Carter W. Martin, in *The True Country: Themes in the Fiction of Flannery O’Connor*, has a similar interpretation and also believes Mrs. May finally does have a major epiphany:

One can see then that her acceptance of death on the horns of the bull is a moment of insight in which she accepts her fate as a final

injustice of the world, not different in kind from the other injustices which she has been subject to. The difference is that while she accepted the others with proud indignation, she accepts this ultimate injustice philosophically... Mrs. May comes to understand the injustices of the world as an aspect of the condition of man, not as a personal affront (231-2).

While it may be true that this is part of Mrs. May's revelation, Martin's analysis seems a little narrow. It has to be remembered that O'Connor's focus is first and foremost, Christian grace and salvation, and I would argue O'Connor would not extend to a character an epiphany that lacked those aspects. The last line of the story, I believe, also reinforces the Christian symbolism. As the scene of the bull and Mrs. May is described, Mrs. May..."felt the quake in the huge body as it sank, pulling her forward on its head, so that she seemed, when Mr. Greenleaf reached her, to be bent over whispering some last discovery into the animal's ear." (TCS 334) A crucial aspect of this scene that critics seem to either ignore, or only mention incidentally, is that the bull is *sacrificed*. Mrs. May is, in essence, whispering words of final understanding into the ear of the symbolic Christ that has given his life for her ultimate salvation.

Still, critics like John R. May argue that we are assuming too much in believing Mrs. May has a soul-saving revelation at the moment of her death. The most critical line reinforcing this opinion may be, not the last one, but the one that comes just before Mr. Greenleaf comes running from the woods to shoot the bull: "She [Mrs. May] continued to stare straight ahead, but the entire scene in front of



her had changed... and she had the look of a person whose sight has been suddenly restored but who finds the light unbearable” (TCS 333).

May argues that the fact that the light is still “unbearable” to Mrs. May, may cast doubt as to whether she has any kind of revelation at all, and that just because enlightenment is offered, “the offer itself does not compel response... and there is little evidence in the text for asserting that Mrs. May comes to understand anything specifically” (100).

We will never know for sure, of course, because O’Connor leaves the question of the extent of Mrs. May’s revelation purposely ambiguous. Ultimately, whether our main character finally “sees the light,” or whether she is simply shocked at the turn of events, matters less to O’Connor than that she is given the *opportunity* of grace, presented several times to her throughout the story. Unwilling to acknowledge more subtle warnings about her pettiness and obsession with social status and possessions, Mrs. May is finally presented with one last violently palpable message. As readers, we can only guess whether it is received, and responded to.

## 5. POSTWAR XENOPHOBIA AND SOCIOECONOMIC CLASS STRUCTURE IN “THE DISPLACED PERSON”

“The Displaced Person,” one of O’Connor’s longest and most complex stories, is at its core, also about the worship of materialism and money at the expense of spirituality, but here O’Connor delves deeper into the socio-historical elements driving that materialism. Postwar paranoia and unease help fuel what, to O’Connor, was a particularly noxious form of Christian hypocrisy – a decidedly *un*-Christian enmity for one’s fellow man disguised as holy righteousness and orthodoxy. This enmity takes the form of xenophobia in the story, and that xenophobia, in turn, masks a fear of material loss and economic “displacement.”

The story itself is divided into three parts, with the first section centered mainly on Mrs. Shortley, and the last two switching focus to Mrs. McIntyre, owner of the farm that Mrs. Shortley and her husband work on. The narrative opens with Mrs. Shortley walking up the road and on to a hill. Physically large in stature, she is described as looking like the “giant wife of the countryside” as she seems to tower over the land in front of her: “She stood on two tremendous legs, with the grand self-confidence of a mountain, and rose, up narrowing bulges of granite, to two icy blue points of light that pierced forward, surveying everything” (TCS 194).

Her pose is one of dominance, and we immediately see this character as someone who is guarded about her “territory.” Mrs. Shortley has climbed the hill to see the black car, driven by Father Flynn and carrying Mr. Guizac (the “displaced person” of the title) and his family – displacement camp survivors being brought to America to work on Mrs. McIntyre’s farm.

We recognize also in this story's opening, two of O'Connor's recurring symbols, and the way Mrs. Shortley reacts to them in this initial scene also reveals a great deal about her character. While she seems to be "surveying everything" she is notably oblivious to both the Sun, a familiar symbol of divine presence in O'Connor's fiction, and the peacock that is following her, a symbol of the Transfiguration and Christ's manifestation in the present. Mrs. Shortley, already suspicious of a foreign element being introduced to the social structure of the farm, is so focused on how the Giuzacs' presence will affect her standing within the farm's social and economic hierarchy, we are told that she "ignored the white afternoon sun which was creeping behind a ragged wall of cloud as if it pretended to be an intruder..." (TCS 194). Likewise, the peacock that has been following behind her and seems to be trying to get her attention, is met with indifference:

The peacock stopped just behind her, his tail – glittering green-gold and blue in the sunlight – lifted just enough so that it would not touch the ground. It flowed out on either side like a floating train and his head on the long blue reed-like neck was drawn back as if his attention were fixed in the distance on something no one else could see. Mrs. Shortley was watching a black car turn through the gate from the highway (TCS 194).

It does not take long, it turns out, for the new transplant to learn the operations of the farm, including how to work and repair all the farm's machinery. More importantly, and to Mrs. Shortley's dismay, Mr. Guizac winds up working noticeably harder and more efficiently than the other farm help –

including Mr. Shortley. So much so that it leads Mrs. McIntyre to exclaim to her that “That man is my salvation!” Mrs. McIntyre’s initial elation with Mr. Guizac fuels Mrs. Shortley’s growing uncertainty about her, up till now, comfortable place in the class structure of the farm, and her preoccupation with what she imagines are Mr. Guizac’s machinations to upset that hierarchy, lead to Mrs. Shortley’s “visions.”

In his essay “Flannery O’Connor’s View of the South: God’s Earth and his Universe,” Thomas Daniel Young sees Mrs. Shortley’s sudden self-styled conversion into a prophet as evidence “that she is confusing the social and religious realms” (10), but does not probe far enough into what that confusion is entrenched in. While he is also correct in noting that Mrs. Shortley is concerned most with the racial and social structure staying in place, he neglects to tie that in with the fear that any shift in that structure would affect her family’s *economic* standing, both within and outside the farm. In foreigners like Mr. Guizac, Mrs. Shortley finds a convenient evil to validate her fears, and does not so much “confuse” as purposely manipulate the biblical. O’Connor adeptly illustrates how easily this xenophobic paranoia can be justified by the bastardization of scripture in the description of Mrs. Shortley’s unique interpretation of the Tower of Babel story. In her version, the lesson becomes a call to arms as Polish words attack English words in a struggle for dominance:

She began to imagine a war of words, to see the Polish words and the English words, coming at each other, stalking forward, not sentences, just words, gabble gabble gabble, flung out high and

shrill and stalking forward and then grappling with each other. She saw the Polish words, dirty and all-knowing and unreformed, flinging mud on the clean English words until everything was equally dirty. She saw them all piled up in a room, all the dead dirty words, theirs and hers too, piled up like the naked bodies in the newsreel. God save me, she cried silently, from the stinking power of Satan! (TCS 209).

The “naked bodies in the newsreel” refers to footage Mrs. Shortley recalls seeing of the Holocaust. Soon after, Mrs. Shortley has a vision that mixes passages in the Book of Ezekiel and that same newsreel footage “of a small room piled high with bodies of dead naked people all in a heap, their arms and legs tangled together, a head thrust in here, a head there, a foot, a knee, a part that should have been covered up sticking out, a hand raised clutching nothing” (TCS 196). Mrs. Shortley blends this recalled footage with scripture, again, to validate her paranoia. It should also be noted that her biblical vision is “Hollywood-ized” by its being introduced as if it was taking place in a movie theater – complete with stage curtain. Here again, as she did in *Wise Blood*, O’Connor takes advantage of an opportunity to comment on the influence of mass media on religion:

Suddenly while she watched, the sky folded back in two pieces like the curtain to a stage and a gigantic figure stood facing her. It was the color of the sun in the early afternoon, white-gold. It was of no definite shape but there were fiery wheels with fierce dark eyes in them, spinning rapidly all around it. She was not able to tell if the

figure was going forward or backward because its magnificence was so great. She shut her eyes in order to look at it and it turned blood-red and the wheels turned white. A voice, very resonant, said the one word, "Prophecy!" She stood there, tottering slightly but still upright, her eyes shut tight and her fists clenched and her straw hat low on her forehead. "The children of wicked nations will be butchered," she said in a loud voice. "Legs where arms should be, foot to face, ear in the palm of the hand. Who will remain whole? Who will remain whole? Who?" (TCS 210)

As Mrs. Shortley walks back to the farm after this vision, she overhears Mrs. McIntyre telling Father Flynn that she plans on firing Mr. Shortley. Having assumed it would be the African American help let go first as they place lower on the social structure on the farm, Mrs. Shortley is genuinely taken by surprise. Furious, she runs home and orders her family to pack up and load everything into their car, telling her husband only "You ain't waiting to be fired!" by way of explanation. As they make their escape in the middle of the night, Mrs. Shortley suffers a fatal stroke in the front seat. The description of her death throes bring to mind one of her prophecies, and O'Connor's vivid scene is made darkly comical by the rickety vehicle, overstuffed with the Shortley family's possessions:

Fierce heat seemed to be swelling slowly and fully into her face as if it were welling up now for a final assault. She was sitting in an erect way in spite of the fact that one leg was twisted under her and one knee was almost into her neck, but there was a peculiar lack of

light in her icy blue eyes. All the vision in them might have been turned around, looking inside her. She suddenly grabbed Mr. Shortley's elbow and Sarah Mae's foot at the same time and began to tug and pull on them as if she were trying to fit the two extra limbs on to herself. Mr. Shortley began to curse and quickly stopped the car and Sarah Mae yelled to quit but Mrs. Shortley apparently intended to rearrange the whole car at once. She thrashed forward and backward, clutching at everything she could get her hands on and hugging it to herself, Mr Shortley's head, Sarah Mae's leg, the cat, a wad of white bedding, her own big moon-like knee; then all at once her fierce expression faded into a look of astonishment and her grip on what she had loosened. One of her eyes drew near to the other and seemed to collapse quietly and she was still (TCS 213-14).

Mrs. Shortley winds up being responsible for the manifestation of her own prophecy of grotesquely misplaced body parts, though not quite in the way she originally envisioned. She winds up becoming one of the "displaced" people she so reviles. The divine judgment she assumed was meant for others ("Who shall remain whole? Who?") has now turned back on her, and faced with impending death, she desperately tries to pull body parts to her to make her "whole" again.

As Part II begins, the focus moves to Mrs. McIntyre. Married three times and divorced twice, we learn that she inherited her farm from her first husband, the Judge, after he died. His being described as always wearing "hightop shoes...

and a yellow panama hat, winter and summer,” and further that his “teeth and hair were tobacco-colored and his face a clay pink pitted and tracked with mysterious prehistoric-looking marks as if he had been unearthed among fossils” (TCS 218), leads many critics, like Farrell O’Gorman (183-4), and Randy Boyagoda (66) to view his character as solely a metaphor for the Old South whose antiquated ideals, like the Judge’s spirit, still linger. The suggestion is that the Judge, who is buried in the middle of the property with his ancestors, will always be entrenched in Mrs. McIntyre’s world physically, just as what he represents will always be entrenched in the Southern social psychology. By extension, the fact that the Judge “left her [Mrs. McIntyre] a mortgaged house and fifty acres that he had managed to cut the timber off before he died” (TCS 218), suggests that O’Connor is also commenting on the deleterious effects of the Southern Tradition’s shallow preoccupation with the appearance of wealth. The fact that there had been “a peculiar odor about him of sweaty fondled bills but he never carried money or had a nickel to show” (TCS 218), seems to add credence to this reading.

But while this reading is not incorrect, the Judge also represents a spiritual aspect in the story. As he is associated with the peacocks, he also represents the Christian conscience that Mrs. McIntyre tries to ignore but cannot quite completely dismiss. Rufel F. Ramos is one critic who sees the Judge as, allegorically, the Christ to Mrs. McIntyre’s Bride of Christ – a symbol of His Church in the world:

Materially poor but spiritually rich – he kept peacocks because  
 “they made him feel rich” – the Judge haunts Mrs. McIntyre even



as she tries to ignore his influence, for instance, by not replacing the last of the Judge's peacocks when it dies someday. In fact she feels superior to the Judge, running the farm in a hard-bitten manner "that the old man himself would have found hard to outdo." In this state of materialistic superiority and solipsistic apostasy from her life with the Judge, Mrs. McIntyre fails morally (Ramos 177).

Mrs. McIntyre sees the last remaining peacock as just "another mouth to feed." Unlike the Judge, she is unable to appreciate anything that does not translate into monetary profit. The peacock in her mind is not only useless, but a drain on her financially. Her materialism is also alluded to by the statue over the Judge's grave. In her essay, "The Narrative Secret of Flannery O'Connor: The Trickster as Interpreter," Ruthann Knechel Johansen explains...

At the center of the McIntyre world lies the grave of the judge bearing the naked granite cherub Mrs. McIntyre refers to as an angel. Associating Mrs. McIntyre with the statue through her "aging cherubic face" and the report that the judge bought it "partly because its face reminded him of his wife," O'Connor turns Mrs. McIntyre into a living statue, a spectacle hardened into stone who, through her connection with the naked stone cherub, stands guard as an anagogical symbol over *her* territory (64).

Mrs. McIntyre's focus is on her money and her property, and the closest thing to religion she can claim is a reliance on a structure of socio-economic

hierarchy that keeps her firmly in charge of “her territory.” Her initial loyalty to Guizac, for instance, is not due to her realization of his arrival as a chance at Grace. On the contrary, her exclamation of “That man is my salvation” only lays bare her fixation on the material. He is only her salvation because he is saving her money. O’Connor drives this point home by having Mrs. McIntyre refer to him in Christ-like terms. We are told, for example, that “the truth was that he was not very real to her yet. He was a kind of miracle that she had seen happen and that she talked about but that she still didn’t believe” (TCS 219).

In making both Guizac and the peacock obvious Christ-figures, O’Connor uses them to expose the true depth of Mrs. McIntyre’s spiritual desolation. When voicing her feelings regarding either the peacock or Guizac, what Mrs. McIntyre is actually revealing is her own spiritual bankruptcy. Nowhere in the story is this more perfectly depicted than in the conversations between Mrs. McIntyre and Father Flynn. Father Flynn appreciates the peacock for its symbolic significance – something Mrs. McIntyre is oblivious to:

“What a beauty-ful birdrrrd!” the priest murmured.

“Another mouth to feed,” Mrs. McIntyre said, glancing in the peafowl’s direction.

“And when does he raise his splendid tail?” asked the priest.

“Just when it suits him,” she said. “There used to be twenty or thirty of those

things on the place but I’ve let them die off. I don’t like to hear

them scream in the middle of the night.”

“So beauty-ful,” the priest said. “A tail full of suns,” and he crept forward on tiptoe and looked down on the bird’s back where the polished gold and green design began. The peacock stood still as if he had just come down from some sun-drenched height to be a vision for them all. The priest’s homely red face hung over him glowing with pleasure. (TCS 198)

Mrs. McIntyre is blind to the peacock’s significance, just as she is blind to Mrs. Guizac’s arrival as an opportunity for salvation – which is why her opinion of him can be turned so dramatically. At the end of the second section of the story, Mrs. McIntyre learns Mr. Guizac has made a business deal with Sulk, one of the African American farm hands. Sulk has been helping pay to bring Guizac’s teenage cousin to America with a promise that she would marry him. Mrs. McIntyre is so horrified that she decides to fire Mr. Guizac and tries to convey this to Father Flynn, who is distracted as usual by the peacock. In the excerpt below, the peacock and Mr. Guizac are associated with Christ symbolically, but O’Connor also masterfully connects them through misunderstanding. The priest and Mrs. McIntyre are never talking about the same one of the three, making them interchangeable:

The cock stopped suddenly and curving his neck backwards, he raised his tail and spread it with a shimmering timbrous noise.

Tiers of small pregnant suns floated in a green-gold haze over his

head. The priest stood transfixed. Mrs. McIntyre wondered where she had ever seen such an idiotic old man.

“Christ will come like that!” he said in a loud gay voice...

“It is not my responsibility that Mr. Guizac has nowhere to go,” she said. “I don’t find myself responsible for all the extra people in the world.”

The old man didn’t seem to hear her. His attention was fixed on the cock who was taking minute steps backward, his head against the spread tail.

“The Transfiguration,” he murmured.

She had no idea what he was talking about.

“Mr. Guizac didn’t have to come here in the first place,” she said, giving him a hard look. The cock lowered his head and began to pick grass.

“He didn’t have to come in the first place,” she repeated, emphasizing each word. The old man smiled absently.

“He came to redeem us,” he said and blandly reached for her hand and shook it and said he must go (TCS 226).

When Father Flynn visits next and begins sermonizing, Mrs. McIntyre loses patience and finally removes for the reader, all uncertainty about Mr. Guizac’s symbolic presence in the story:

He sat on her porch, taking no notice of her partly mocking, partly outraged expression as she sat shaking her foot, waiting for an

opportunity to drive a wedge into his talk.

“For,” he was saying, as if he spoke of something that had happened yesterday in town, “when God sent his Only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ Our Lord” – he slightly bowed his head- “as a Redeemer to mankind, He...”

“Father Flynn!” she said in a voice that made him jump. “I want to talk to you about something serious!”

The skin under the old man’s eye flinched.

“As far as I’m concerned,” she said and glared at him fiercely,

“Christ was just another D.P.” (TCS 229)

It is in this last frustrated remark that Mrs. McIntyre finally reveals what O’Connor’s symbolism has been hinting at – Christ was indeed another displaced person, someone who “upset the balance around here,” and who “didn’t have to come in the first place.” To further justify her decision to fire Mr. Guizac (seemingly as much to herself as to Father Flynn) Mrs. McIntyre then turns to economic arguments:

She told him how she had been hanging onto this place for thirty years, always just barely making it against people who came from nowhere and were going nowhere, who didn’t want anything but an automobile. She said she had found out they were the same whether they came from Poland or Tennessee. When the Guizacs got ready, she said, they would not hesitate to leave her. She told him how the people who looked rich were the poorest of all

because they had the most to keep up. She asked him how he thought she paid her feed bills. She told him she would like to have her house done over but she couldn't afford it. She couldn't even afford to have the monument restored over her husband's grave. She asked him if he would like to guess what her insurance amounted to for the year. Finally she asked him if he thought she was made of money and the old man suddenly let out a great ugly bellow as if this were a comical question (TCS 230).

Father Flynn's reaction was probably in response to the irony of Mrs. McIntyre's statement. It is indeed money that she is "made of"- nothing else seems to matter to her. Anything that could potentially upset the economic hierarchy which she sits atop is a threat to her. Thus when Mrs. McIntyre responds to Father Flynn's appeals to keep Mr. Guizac on with the protest that "He's extra and he's upset the balance around here," she is speaking of Christ as well, even if she does not realize it herself. The "balance" that Guizac would be upsetting is one rooted in a Southern social structure that actually encourages *imbalance*. Mr. Guizac is a threat because he does not judge people based on established social hierarchies. Upon his arrival, he not only kisses Mrs. McIntyre's hand, he shakes the hands of the African American help "like he didn't know the difference, like he might have been as black as them," as Mrs. Shortley recounts (TCS 207). At first, Mr. Guizac's egalitarian attitude is tolerated by Mrs. McIntyre as a quirk of his "foreign-ness," and, more importantly, outweighed by the money his work ethic saves her. That changes

dramatically, of course, when she learns of Mr. Guizac's plan to bring his teenage cousin to America. Now afraid of Guizac's influence where she was once championing his inclusion, her new-found angst is spurred on by Mr. Shortley, who returns in the last section of the story and is given his old job back just as Mrs. McIntyre decides to fire Guizac. The changes in Mrs. McIntyre and Mr. Shortley illustrate how Mrs. Shortley's paranoia endures even after her death. Planting the seeds of fear in her seemingly "dead" husband, he is awakened by those same insecurities and spreads them himself throughout the town, to "every person he saw, black or white." Secure enough in his social position at the farm, he ignores his wife's warnings until he finds himself without an income. Usurped of his economic status, he blames Mr. Guizac. From there it is but a short leap in the line of illogic he is now being governed by to also blame Mr. Guizac for his wife's death. These fears eventually infect the already anxious Mrs. McIntyre, who, looking for pretext to rid herself of Guizac, easily believes the absurd reasoning Mr. Shortley uses to justify his hostility. He confuses not only the first and second world wars, but also enemy nations with allies:

There was a corpse-like composure about his [Mr. Shortley's] face. "I figure that Pole killed her," he said. "She seen through him from the first. She known he come from the devil. She told me so."... Mr. Shortley said he never had cared for foreigners since he had been in the first world's war and seen what they were like. He said he had seen all kinds then but that none of them were like us. He said he recalled the face of one man who had thrown a hand-

grenade at him and that the man had had little round eye-glasses exactly like Mr. Guizac's.

"But Mr. Guizac is a Pole, he's not a German," Mrs. McIntyre said.

"It ain't a great deal of difference in them two kinds," Mr. Shortley had explained (TCS 227).

In this way, Mr. Shortley justifies the climactic murder of Mr. Guizac that both Mrs. McIntyre and Sulk wind up complicit in. Convinced Mr. Guizac is still a threat to him, even though Mrs. McIntyre had told him she was going to give Mr. Guizac his notice, Mr. Shortley perverts a biblical passage ("Revenge is mine, saith the Lord.") to rationalize his actions. As Guizac is working underneath one tractor, Mr. Shortley parks another one on an incline and sets it on its course:

She (Mrs. McIntyre) heard the brake on the large tractor slip and, looking up, she saw it move forward, calculating its own path.

Later she remembered that she had seen the Negro jump silently out of the way as if a spring in the earth had released him and that she had seen Mr. Shortley turn his head with incredible slowness and stare silently over his shoulder and that she had started to shout to the Displaced Person but that she had not. She had felt her eyes and Mr. Shortley's eyes and the Negro's eyes come together in one look that froze them in collusion forever, and she had heard the little noise the Pole made as the tractor wheel broke his backbone (TCS 234).



John R. May, focused on the idea of Mr. Guizac as an agitator of the status quo in terms of social class structures, sees Mrs. McIntyre's involvement in Guizac's death as socio-politically motivated:

Mrs. McIntyre is willing finally – in the moment of demonic collusion that prevents her, Mr. Shortley, or Sulk from shouting a warning to Mr. Guizac – to forego the clear economic advantage that he offers in order to preserve the ancient taboos. She utterly misconstrues what “her moral obligation... to her own people” actually is. Rejecting the human savior, she forsakes the very possibility of salvation for herself and her people. Mrs. McIntyre's displacement from her true country is complete; the isolation of her last days, total and pathetic (94).

While I agree that Mrs. McIntyre absolves herself with misguided rationalizations about what her “moral obligation” actually is, what May fails to acknowledge is that Mrs. McIntyre's choice to preserve the ancient taboos is a matter of degrees, not opposites. Those ancient taboos are rooted in the fear of economic upheaval. Mrs. McIntyre simply decides the larger threat to her secure place in the economic hierarchy overrides the smaller economic loss she would suffer in the money Mr. Guizac was saving her. It is still, ultimately, the instinct to hold on to her property and possessions that allows Mrs. McIntyre to justify her horrific betrayal of Mr. Guizac (and by extension, her fellow man, and, symbolically, Christ). Ironically, in the end, she winds up losing the very thing she was willing to sacrifice a human life for – her property falls to ruin. As most

of her help abandons her, she is forced to sell her cattle “at a loss” and retires “to live on what she had.” She winds up bedridden with a “nervous affliction” the symptoms of which again reference the news-reel prophecy that manifested in Mrs. Shortley’s death throes; we are told that a “numbness developed in one of her legs and her hands and her head began to jiggle...” Like Mrs. Shortley, Mrs. McIntyre pays the price for a “religion” rooted in narcissism and used as a convenient excuse for selfish ends.

O’Connor, by making Mrs. McIntyre’s farm a microcosm of not only the post-war South, but post-war America as a whole, exposes how easily bigotry and xenophobia feed off materialism and spread, disease-like, in an environment of spiritual hollowness.

## 6. THE RATTLE OF THE FUTURE: STEWARDSHIP VS. COMMERCIALISM IN “A VIEW OF THE WOODS”

In “A View of the Woods” O’Connor’s attitudes on modern materialism take specific focus on the intrusion of commercialism on the pastoral, and she presents

us with yet another avaricious land owner. In this story, however, the character is a seventy-nine year old grandfather named, appropriately enough, Mark Fortune. Mr. Fortune lives with his daughter's family, which includes her husband and their children. Their surname is Pitts and Mr. Fortune despises them and anything associated with their name. Though she is the only one of his children that has troubled to take him in and care for him, Fortune shows nothing but disdain for his daughter, not even being able to remember whether she was his third offspring or his fourth.

Mr. Fortune owns the vast acreage that the family house is situated on and he uses it to wield absolute control. He allows his son-in-law to farm the land, but will not sell him any of it, nor will he allow him to make any improvements to the property, like putting in a well, for fear of giving up the slightest bit of control of any part of his domain. Worse, Mr. Fortune sells off pieces of the land whenever he sees money to be made, without any regard to what Pitts may be using it for. Fortune justifies his avarice in the name of "progress," and his utopian vision is one of commercial modernization and financial profit:

The Fortune place was in the country on a clay road that left the paved road fifteen miles away and he would never have been able to sell off any lots if it had not been for progress, which had always been his ally. He was not one of these old people who fight improvement, who object to everything new and cringe at every change. He wanted to see a paved highway in front of his house with plenty of new-model cars on it, he wanted to see a

supermarket store across the road from him, he wanted to see a gas station, a motel, a drive-in picture show within easy distance.

Progress had suddenly set all this in motion. The electric power company had built a dam on the river and flooded great areas of the surrounding country and the lake that resulted touched his land along a half-mile stretch. Every Tom, Dick, and Harry, every dog and his brother, wanted a lot on the lake. There was talk of their getting a telephone line. There was talk of paving the road that ran in front of the Fortune place. There was talk of an eventual town. He thought this should be called Fortune, Georgia. He was a man of advanced vision, even if he was seventy-nine years old (TCS 337-8).

As Neil Scheurich and Vincent Mullen perceptively suggest in their essay “Narcissism and Spirituality in Flannery O’Connor’s Stories,” Mr. Fortune’s materialism has vainglorious underpinnings (545). This is certainly evinced not only by his imagining the new town he is dreaming of should be named after him, but, even more unequivocally, by his connection to his youngest granddaughter, Mary Fortune. Though the Fortune family includes six other grandchildren, she is the only one he cares anything about. At first refusing his daughter’s offer to have the newest child named after him because of his revulsion to the idea of being associated in any way with the Pitts name, Fortune immediately changes his mind upon seeing that the new baby bears a striking resemblance to him. The sight of a miniature version of himself leads to a complete change of heart, and

Fortune suggests the baby be named after his mother, Mary, since it turns out to be a girl. From then on Fortune and Mary Fortune are inseparable. He dotes solely on her and they spend their days visiting the construction sites of his latest land sales. Mary Fortune's interest in his business dealings and her fascination with the bulldozers transforming land into commercial property further convince Mr. Fortune that they are kindred spirits. Fortune also takes special delight at the thought of leaving all his wealth and property to Mary Fortune in a trust as his sole beneficiary, and imagining that she will carry on his avaricious ideals. This, of course, would include her continuing to keep her family under her thumb as he had always done.

But from the beginning of the story there are indications that Mary Fortune's soul may not be the perfect match to his that Mr. Fortune assumes it is. The first source of tension between them involves Mary Fortune's quiet submission to her father's beatings. Her deference to Pitts both confounds and exasperates her grandfather, and Mary Fortune's demeanor as her father calls her from the kitchen table to administer punishment leaves her grandfather frustrated and angry at her docility.

A look that was completely foreign to the child's face would appear on it. The old man could not define the look but it infuriated him. It was a look that was part terror and part respect and part something else, something very like cooperation. This look would appear on her face and she would get up and follow Pitts out.

They would get in his truck and drive down the road out of earshot, where he would beat her. (TCS 340)

As bewildering as her submissiveness is to Fortune, he is even more perplexed by her denial of the beatings themselves and this leads to arguments between the two. After following Pitts' truck into the woods and watching her being beaten, Fortune confronts his granddaughter:

The old man had crept forward to catch her. Her face was contorted into a puzzle of small red lumps and her nose and eyes were running. He sprang on her and sputtered, "Why didn't you hit him back? Where's your spirit? Do you think I'd let him beat me?"

She had jumped up and started backing away from him with her jaw stuck out. "Nobody beat me," she said.

"Didn't I see it with my own eyes?" he exploded.

"Nobody is here and nobody beat me," she said. "Nobody's ever beat me in my life and if anybody ever did, I'd kill him. You can see for yourself nobody is here."

"Do you call me a liar or a blindman!" he shouted. "I saw him with my own two eyes and you never did a thing but let him do it, you never did a thing but hang onto that tree and dance up and down a little and blubber and if it had been me, I'd a swung my fist in his face and..."

"Nobody was here and nobody beat me and if anybody did I'd kill

him!” she yelled and turned and dashed off through the woods (TCS 340-41).

The bewilderment that Mr. Fortune experiences may also extend to the reader. Why *does* Mary Fortune allow her father to take her into the woods and beat her without the slightest protest? And how is it that despite her grandfather’s having witnessed it, Mary Fortune insists vehemently that she would never allow anyone to beat her? The answer may be found, not surprisingly, as the author of the story is Flannery O’Connor, in a biblical reference. Verse sixteen in the book of Leviticus gives us the parable of the scapegoat: “But the goat chosen by lot as the scapegoat shall be presented alive before the Lord to be used for making atonement by sending it into the wilderness as a scapegoat. (Lev. 16:10 NIV)

Mary Fortune goes willingly to her beatings because she is the family’s “scapegoat,” brought into the wilderness to bear the punishment for her grandfather’s behavior. Pitts, unable to take his anger out on his father-in-law, who is the real cause of his frustration, sees his youngest daughter, the image of her grandfather, as the next best thing. He fights back at Fortune vicariously through Mary Fortune. Thus, Mary Fortune is associated symbolically with, not only the scapegoat in the wilderness, but the wilderness itself, which O’Connor has already associated with Christ. In the story’s initial scene, Fortune and his granddaughter are parked at a construction site and watch fascinated as wilderness is ravaged “...while the machine systematically ate a square red hole in what had once been a cow pasture.” (TCS 335) The imagery here is obviously reminiscent of Christ’s palms and feet being nailed. The clay in the pit is continually

described as “red” to suggest Christ’s bloodshed. As the two watch the construction, we are told that “... a black line of woods which appeared at both ends of the view to walk across the water and continue along the edge of the fields” (TCS 335).

Christ’s presence within the woods is alluded to throughout the story, but it is when Fortune announces that he is selling “the lawn” that Mary Fortune’s true loyalties and her association with the story’s Christian symbolism become clear. The property in question is the front acreage of the Fortune house where the children play and where they have a clear “view of the woods.” While Fortune expects, and even relishes, the rest of the Fortune family’s horrified reaction, he is shocked to see Mary Fortune sharing in their disapproval. Mr. Fortune cannot comprehend letting a “cow pasture interfere with the future” (TCS 338), and mistakenly expects his granddaughter to share his attitude. Mary Fortune’s seemingly sudden repudiation, though it ultimately does not deter him from his business transaction, at least seems to give him pause. More to the point, from O’Connor’s perspective, it gives him a chance at choosing grace over monetary gain. As illustrated in the following scene, Fortune senses he is being sent a message but chooses, ultimately, not to listen to it. The morning after he has argued with his granddaughter, he expects her to come rushing in to his room to wake him up as she does every morning, but he has misinterpreted Mary Fortune’s resolve. She never shows up and he spends the day alone in his room in contemplation:



The third time he got up to look at the woods, it was almost six o'clock and the gaunt trunk appeared to be raised in a pool of red light that gushed from the almost hidden sun setting behind them. The old man stared for some time, as if for a prolonged instant he were caught up out of the rattle of everything that led to the future and were held there in the midst of an uncomfortable mystery that he had not apprehended before. He saw it, in his hallucination, as if someone were wounded behind the woods and the trees were bathed in blood. After a few minutes this unpleasant vision was broken by the presence of Pitt's pick-up truck grinding to a halt below the window. He returned to his bed and shut his eyes and against the closed lids hellish red trunks rose up in a black wood (TCS 348).

It is in this scene that the title of the story resonates. The motif of vision/sight is, of course, a prevalent one in O'Connor's work, and here again, it points to a spiritual blindness. If the woods reveal Christ's presence, Mr. Fortune refuses to "see" them and cannot understand why the view of them could be more valuable than monetary profit. Consequently, he winds up following through on the sale of the family's beloved "lawn" despite his portentous daydream. Frederick Asals correctly sees this passage as the pivotal scene in the story, one which delineates the Christian theme:

*View* has become *vision*, the literal the metaphoric, and the rest of the story exploits the symbolic overtones of the old man's sudden

(and temporary) revelation: the archetypal dark wood, the suffering body of the earth itself, the “bloody wood” of primitive sacrificial ritual – and its New Testament analogue. (70)

Finally, O’Connor herself, in a letter to her friend Betty Hester, said outright that the woods in the story were the work’s Christ symbol. (HB 190) This would seem to remove all uncertainty at what O’Connor was trying to convey - that the destruction of nature in the name of “progress” and commercial profit is antithetical to Christianity.

But while the Christian symbolism in the story is arguably more conspicuous, some critics see clear Old Testament references at play as well. Jill Pelaez Baumgaertner, for instance, sees the clay in the story’s first scene as a significant symbol:

It is progress that allows the bulldozer in to eat the clay of his [Fortune’s] land, clay which so often in Scripture refers to the stuff of life which God shapes to form humankind... The presence of clay opens and closes “A View of the Woods,” in both cases in the jaws of the huge steam-shovel clearing Mr. Fortune’s land. (129-30)

Taking Pelaez Baumgaertner’s observation a logical step further, if the manipulation of “clay” is exclusively God’s work, Fortune is trespassing, metaphorically and literally, where he does not belong. His teetering on this allegorical precipice is suggested by his getting as close as he can physically to the edge of the pit being dug up, and furthermore, delighting in his granddaughter’s doing the same. He does not acknowledge the literal danger of

“falling into the pit,” just as he ignores the danger of taking God’s creation for granted and manipulating it for material profit.

Similarly, Miles Orvell sees “A View of the Woods” as strongly tied, allegorically, to the Genesis myth. He argues that the property Mary Fortune sees as divine in its own right, and that Mr. Fortune wants to sell for profit, represents Eden. It would follow then, that Fortune’s lack of respect for the land’s true value and his selfishly letting it go, can symbolically be seen as The Fall. (Orvell 15) Orvell’s theory is certainly well-supported. Tilman, for example, as the one who persuades Fortune to sell the property, is given very obvious serpent-like qualities that peg him as the devil-in-disguise in the Garden:

Tilman was a man of quick action and few words. He sat habitually with his arms folded on the counter and his insignificant head weaving snake-fashion above them. He had a triangular-shaped face with the point at the bottom and the top of his skull was covered with a cap of freckles. His eyes were green and very narrow and his tongue was always exposed in his partly opened mouth. (TCS 352)

But O’Connor may be weaving in yet a third mythology here. As the contract between Fortune and Tilman is signed and the sale is finalized, the scene is reminiscent of the Faustian fable:

Mr. Fortune’s sense of relief as he grasped Tilman’s hand was extreme. What was done, he felt, was done and there could be no

more argument, with her or himself. He felt that he had acted on principle and that the future was assured. Just as their hands loosened, an instant's change came over Tilman's face and he disappeared completely under the counter as if he had been snatched by the feet from below. (TCS 352)

We learn in the next sentence that it is a bottle thrown at him by an angry Mary Fortune that causes Tilman to duck under the counter, but until we read further, what comes immediately to mind is the image of Mephistopheles disappearing suddenly in a puff of smoke. Tilman's being "snatched by the feet from below" suggests his being summoned back as Lucifer's agent after the nefarious pact is finalized. Marlowe's themes, in his version of the Faust legend, *The Tragical Historie of Doctor Faustus*, would certainly have resonated with O'Connor. His protagonist, like O'Connor's, chooses earthly possessions over Salvation. Just as Marlowe was commenting on the Renaissance ideology that replaced the spiritual with the secular, and moved the focus from God to the quest for worldly knowledge and the need to master nature, so does O'Connor give us a modern morality play. Mr. Fortune becomes a Faust for the American post-war era – a character who is given every opportunity to find Grace and refuses it for, not only monetary profit, but the vanity that comes with it.

Mr. Fortune's hallucinatory vision of the sky line that looked "as if someone were wounded behind the woods and the trees were bathed in blood" (TCS 348), is evocative of the vision Faustus has in the last scene of Marlowe's play in which he cries out "See, see where Christ's blood streams in the firmament!" (44)

Indeed, the entire last scene in “A View of the Woods” is redolent of the last scene in *Dr. Faustus*. Mr. Fortune decides, after Mary Fortune’s violent outburst at Tilman’s, that she has become spoiled because he has never beaten her. When he takes her into the woods to deliver punishment, Mary Fortune retaliates and pummels him until he gains the upper hand and smashes her head into a rock, killing her. Fortune’s heart subsequently gives out and in his dying moment he looks to the woods for the Salvation that he has heretofore denied:

Then he fell on his back and looked up helplessly along the bare tops into the tops of the pines and his heart expanded once more with a convulsive motion. It expanded so fast that the old man felt as if he were being pulled after it through the woods, felt as if he were running as fast as he could with the ugly pines toward the lake. He perceived that there would be a little opening there, a little place where he could escape and leave the woods behind him. He could see it in the distance already, a little opening where the white sky was reflected in the water. It grew as he ran toward it until suddenly the whole lake opened up before him, riding majestically in little corrugated folds toward his feet... On both sides of him he saw that the gaunt trees had thickened into mysterious dark files that were marching across the water and away into the distance. He looked around desperately for someone to help him but the place was deserted except for one huge yellow

monster which sat to the side, as stationary as he was, gorging  
itself on clay (TCS 356).

The earth (and its symbolic representation of Christ) that Fortune has disrespected, is now turning its back on him. The woods march away from him as he looks for help. This is an echo of the last scene in *Dr. Faustus*, in which Faustus is also looking for “a little opening” or loophole that will keep him out of hell as he realizes, too late, the consequences of the pact he has made with the devil. He too looks for help around him, and is rejected by God’s creation:

Ah, rend not my heart for naming of my Christ;  
Yet will I call on him — O spare me, Lucifer!  
Where is it now? 'Tis gone: and see where God  
Stretcheth out his arm, and bends his ireful brows!  
Mountains and hills, come, come and fall on me,  
And hide me from the heavy wrath of God.  
No, no?  
Then will I headlong run into the earth:  
Earth, gape! O no, it will not harbor me (44).

Faustus’ ultimate damnation in the Faust myth is also significant in terms of parallel in that Mr. Fortune may arguably be the only one of O’Connor’s characters to end up likewise – that is, conclusively damned. While most of O’Connor’s protagonists are left at the precipice of revelation, leaving the reader to decide whether each character will act or not on their respective epiphany, the

woods as a symbol of Christ in “A View of the Woods” turn away from the story’s main character. The implication, of course, is that Mr. Fortune dies without the hope of salvation. Coming from O’Connor, this certainly has to be seen as, not only a severe condemnation of avarice and materialism, but a clear statement regarding the Christian responsibility of stewardship of God’s earth. Her ultimate concern is that society is trading in “a view of the woods,” that is, a clear vision of Christ’s presence, for a commercial excess that blocks that vision or “view.” This makes the final image of the story a striking one: Mr. Fortune, finally looking for Deliverance at the end of his life, finds only a steam shovel, the destructive apathetic symbol of the only god he has worshipped – “progress.”

## 7. CONCLUSION

Too often, Flannery O'Connor's "Southernness" and Christianity are seen in isolation. There is a tendency, I believe, to see her as someone with a limited viewpoint, colored exclusively by her remote surroundings in rural Georgia where she spent the majority of her life. To the casual reader it would be easy to see her Southern grotesque characters and backwoods settings as indicative of a writer with a decidedly confined scope of reference.

O'Connor herself was, of course, at times complicit in encouraging this caricatured persona. She often used a colloquial tone in letters, speeches, and essays to humorous effect. In a letter to her friend Maryat Lee, who was planning a trip abroad, for instance, she joked "when in Rome, do as you done in Milledgeville" (HB 220). When the topic of a biography of her life came up, she retorted that "there won't be any biographies of me because, for only one reason, lives spent between the house and the chicken yard do not make exciting copy" (HB 290).

These self-effacing mannerisms, however, belied an incredibly well-read scholar; one who was acutely aware of, not only other writers, but the emergence of literary movements and the socio-political currents driving them. These currents drove O'Connor as well, and make O'Connor a writer who begs to be re-examined as an astute and cutting social critic, whose scope went well beyond the confines of her beloved state of Georgia. To O'Connor, the economic prosperity and technological advancements following World War II masked something perilous. O'Connor was witnessing what was, to her, a nation losing its spiritual direction - one that was succumbing to the shiny new technology of the future and



to the advertising industry's taking advantage of middle class prosperity. This cultural shift was permeating everything in O'Connor's view, especially and most alarmingly, Christianity.

Is it unfairly reductive, then, to simply label O'Connor a "Catholic writer?" Yes and no. While O'Connor certainly should not be *confined* by that signature, there is no doubt that her Catholicism was the lens through which she viewed, censured, satirized the spiritual erosion she felt was taking place in her lifetime. Thus, while each of the works examined here may confront different versions of materialism, whether it be the obsession with holding on to property, lust for automobiles, monetary greed, etc., they all have a common thread within the context of O'Connor's Christianity: whatever aspect of materialism is addressed cannot be divorced from its effect on the Christian consciousness. For O'Connor the social critic, the cultural cannot be separated from the spiritual. "I am a Catholic peculiarly possessed of the modern consciousness," O'Connor stated bluntly in a letter to Betty Hester, "To possess this within the Church is to bear a burden, the necessary burden for a conscious Catholic. It's to feel the contemporary situation at the ultimate level" (HB 90). What I hope to have revealed in this thesis, is a writer who, through a decidedly Christian perspective, was acutely aware of the cultural changes going on around her, a writer who indeed felt "the contemporary situation at the ultimate level," and whose faith compelled her to unveil and define it.



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